

WOMEN'S MAGAZINES IN ENGLISH IN INDIA: THE MODERN AGONY AUNTS

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ABSTRACT

What is popular or newly emerging today in the form of customs, beliefs, behavioural patterns or ways of living of people in a particular culture or a subculture will be the folklore for the coming generations for that ethnic group. Folklores are no longer just the grandmother's songs, proverbs, maxims, legendary tales or history meant to be orally transmitted by one generation to another or to be operating outside the institutionalised channels. The beginning of the twentieth century experienced the outbreak of print revolution affecting the lives of the common wo/man and continued to rule the mindset of millions of people till the emergence of the e-revolution that has been controlling our lives for more than a decade now. Amidst the changing trends in the patterns of receiving or granting cultural values and beliefs, one finds the 'old wives' tales', 'agony aunts or uncles' and the 'dai mas' or 'tau jis' now being replaced by their counterparts in columns in newspaper supplements or magazines or online counsellors and social networking websites. The new woman has left the threshold of the "doll's house", broken the "glass ceiling" and stepped out to breathe the fresh air of individuality and independence. Albeit, independence comes with its own costs and new challenges. Where does she go to find solutions for her queries? To whom does she consult when she seeks advice? What does she do to express or voice her anguish and pain? These questions find answers in the new age magazines for women that have undergone a tremendous change in their layout, contents, outlook, perspectives and visuals as compared to those of their predecessors. This paper aims to examine the contents of a few of the leading and largest selling magazines for women of India today.

KEYWORDS: Women, Reading Habits, Classes, Age Groups, Agony Aunts

INTRODUCTION

Elle, Woman's Era, New Woman, Femina, Savvy, Verve many other magazines for women in India have been launched or revamped in and around the last two decades reflecting the spirit of today's woman, especially the English speaking urban women of India. Targeting the women readers from all the age groups between the early teens and the senior /super senior citizens, these magazines largely cater to the reading thirsts of the elites, the socialites, the self employed, the employed and more recently added to the list of readers is a group of the 'metro-sexual' men.

A broad coverage of sections mark these popular culture tools that may be denigrated by literary masters or critics as modes representing the 'here today-gone tomorrow' set of literary representations. However, the truth remains that the overpowering dominance of the e-magazines, journals and books or the temporariness of these materials have not affected the circulation of the print magazines. One of the reasons for their wide popularity and readability could be the variety and the innovativeness of the topics that they cover across their volumes. Cuisine – international or regional (at times, whose ingredients or gadgets are Greek and Latin for most of the women), counselling- legal, sociological and psychological or clinical (always ending with the tag- if the problem persists, please consult a doctor), relationships, parenting, beauty, travel, gossip, self-help, shopping or any other information that a woman desires to acquire or rather should acquire are all

captured in those bulky volumes.

In addition to the anniversary specials, special supplements and booklets printed on glossy papers and in silky inks mark a unique combination of glamour and commerce. Notwithstanding the fact that if one carefully goes through each of them, one finds that all of them are power packed with a flashy pageantry of eye-catching, enamouring visuals, in the form of photographs, pictures, images and calligraphic texts. While going through a few of them, it was noted that out of their average number of pages ranging from 175 to 200 pages. 75 percent of their pages contained powerful visuals and the rest of them were allotted to the written texts in the form of editorials, recipes, feature columns, interviews of celebrities, insightful articles, fiction, poetry, tips and chats and others. In comparison to the style, content and layout of the *Eve's Weekly* and *Mother* - the women's magazines of the yesteryears- and to a certain extent *Femina* too, which has been published since 1958 and still continues to be in circulation, the magazines of last two decades focus less on textual material and feature more number of visuals than their predecessors.

India's rich heritage of folklores have survived over the period of many centuries on oral traditions passed from one generation to the next in modified versions often, influenced by the changes in social norms. Folklores generally consist of legends, oral histories, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, fairy tales and customs that are the traditions of that culture, subculture, or group. It is also the set of practices through which those expressive genres are shared.

Further, folklore can be divided into four areas of study: artifact (such as *kalash* holding a coconut decorated with *ashoka* leaves for good omen), describable and transmissible entity (oral tradition), culture, and behaviour (rituals). These areas do not stand alone. They are influenced by the changes that take place in the lifestyles of people which gets metamorphosed from generation to generation. Folklores over a long period of time undergo changes with the passage of time and also tend to incarnate or re-incarnate themselves into varied representations. It is not an exaggeration to state that with the invention of print technology, their oral forms partially got replaced by paper ones. Eventually, when computers arrived, the e-forms of folklores emerged to the extent of forming virtual communities and faceless societies.

The twenty first century witnessed the outbreak of the IT revolution and the mounting progress in the area of communication technology; the transmission of culture is now much replaced by online search engines. Albeit, the reign of printed paper that ruled the world for more than two centuries still remains untouched with millions of copies of books and magazines still being sold in the market despite the efforts made by the publishers to reach online to their readers. *Femina* has the largest circulation, in India today with the circulation of 138,636 copies sold (Audit Bureau of Circulations, July-Dec 2005) followed by *Woman's Era*, *Savvy*, *The Good Housekeeping* and other magazines. The circulation numbers evidently prove that the magazines act as cultural and social vehicles that gear up the modern, urban lifestyle of families living in a nuclear, single, blended gay and lesbian, adoptive parent or large family patterns.

The question that arises here is that why have these magazines been scaling such lofty heights of success and large numbers of circulation, in spite of the fact that primarily they are business items or profit making units? What do these magazines actually stand for and how do they pose the new Indian woman so as to make her feel important or an integral part of her immediate environment. The new Indian woman is an icon of multitasking capabilities. She juggles hard to keep the balance between her domestic, occupational, societal, familial spheres. Her continuous concern for her home, office, family, community, neighbourhood, society or cultural groups often drives her into a state of worries, queries, fears, anxiety, weakness or nervousness. With the vanishing of joint/extended families, the professional counsellors and "how-to" books replaced the roles played by the *nanis*, *dadis*, *chachis* and *dai-mas*. The "woman-from- a nuclear -family" learnt to

struggle with the marital, parental and domestic responsibilities in a trial and error manner.

Amidst these dynamics, a new role for woman, and this time a positive one, that has emerged in the contemporary society and economics is that of being an indispensable consumer. Gone are those days when she was a passive player who had hardly anything to contribute to the family's income or nation's economy. In fact, the picture that emerged in media in past was that of a woman who never produced knowledge or wealth but always consumed and remained a sort of hanger-on to her male. The status of women in any society has always been a matter of great debate heading many a movements, at times to the extent of being radical.

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw the process of metamorphoses in the roles played by women- from being a domestic manager to a prime purchaser. She has now emerged as a potential consumer, ready to redefine her status in the worldwide economy, and her contribution to the society is no longer confined to being solely a progenitor. It was the man who was the consumer for the whole family and thus a target for marketers. From the woman totally dependent on a man to the totally independent career woman of today, women have made their way through and have evolved as individuals in their own right. And as far as the notion of consumers is concerned, women have become the target market for products and services in India.

Women who just shared spaces in magazines being merely sex objects or housewives now carry a full coverage in women's magazines where she is no longer in her stereotypical image but voices her grievances, gives opinions and speaks candidly about her extra marital relations, issues related to troubled marriages, menopausal or menstrual disorders, professional rivalries and legal dimensions to her social or family problems.

Magazines in India are regarded as a strategic informational, educational and cultural institution as well as the fifth state of public inquest. They are read for gaining knowledge, for recreation and for equipping oneself with the latest information. Women's magazines were introduced in the Indian market only after the women's liberation movement. They now reach out to women in both urban and rural societies in India and cater to women in terms of their age, class and role. The market for women's magazines is increasing at such a rapid pace that it is no more flooded only with domestic women's magazines but also with global ones such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* which choose to cater to an elite audience. And the ad agencies that create the advertisements in these magazines strive to promote a sophisticated consumerist culture and encourage the readers to imitate the style, philosophy and format of western magazines and advertisements.

As advertising vehicles, women's magazines are among the most desirable of publications and are aimed at the sector of the population traditionally more responsible for purchases. The strength of these magazines rests principally on the crucial role of women in the consumption process. The front cover of a magazine is the vehicle by which the consumer distinguishes one magazine from another and serves to label not only the magazine but also the consumer who possesses it. Women's magazines use their front covers as advertisements for themselves. Their cover pictures and names, whether it's *Hers*, *She*, *Women's World* or *Women's Era*, proclaim that these journals are for women only. The cover shapes the reader's understanding of the material in the inside pages.

In the post-feministic 1990s and subsequently thereafter, advertisers have been attempting to construct multiple possible identities for women in an effort to change their stereotypical image and enhance their spending power. In India, nowhere is this trend reflected more clearly than in advertising imagery, where the image of the 'new Indian woman' is expressed explicitly. Today in India, women appear less frequently dependent upon men while men are less likely to be

depicted in themes of sex appeal, dominance over women and as authority figures. Advertisements have also started portraying women more frequently as career-oriented and in non-traditional activities and are constructing the persona of the 'new Indian woman'.

Bearing in mind the importance of the 'new Indian woman' as a consumer, advertisers have targeted this profile in a systematic manner. With the increase in urban population, the trend is of booming consumerism. Based on extensive market research, advertisements for goods and services are now addressed to the growing class of urban middle-class woman with either independent salaries or who have an increasing control in purchase decisions. Even with the entry of global products as well as advertising, the role played by the Indian woman in advertising is still very much Indian—in the sense that strategies of advertising representation are careful to avoid a 'westernized' image of her. Hence, media producers attempt to construct a cognate, pan-Indian identity for this 'new woman', cutting across regional, linguistic, caste and other differences. In this way India, with its own social and cultural imperatives, has managed to keep its distinctive cultural baggage even in the face of an increasingly open market system.

This has led to a paradigm shift in the contents of these magazines. The earlier articles that covered up recipes, domestic tips, art of parenting, crochet, embroidery or short stories much based on domestic warfares are now replaced by columns on ergonomics, financial plannings, professional advices, career talks and options, self-help, legal and psychological assistance, fashions and spirituality, developing soft skills, professional- practical wisdoms and success stories of women who have achieved their goals. While comparing the issues of three magazines *Femina*, *Woman's Era* and *marie claire*, it is found that all the three of them come out with special issues on yoga, health, fashions, beauty, careers, law, violence, female celebrities and other matters. All the three of them offer special guidance on common issues such as domestic violence, sexual assaults, exploitation at the place of work. They also provide elaborate lists of resource persons, welfare agencies and NGOs that help women to overcome the situations of distress. In some of the leading magazines there are special coverages on success or trauma stories that serve as eye openers to women who do not know whom to resort to in times of difficulties or crisis.

The urban India is slowly transforming into a western society. The West, through the various media, is increasingly influencing this sector of the Indian economy, especially in terms of its fashion—and nowhere is this trend more prominent than in Indian women's fashion magazines. This shows that even though Indian advertisements have Indian models with traditional dresses, they are being increasingly replaced with models in western outfits or have other western aspects to them. It is only in the last 20 years that India has opened up to western culture. With the advent of privatisation and the liberalisation of the economy, India has seen a surge of multinationals invade her consumer market. And the new revolution in advertising is also a true revelation of the changed consumer scenario. The presence of an increasing number of women's magazines, as well as advertising in these magazines portraying the different roles of women, clearly reveal the changing perception of women in today's society. As marketers, unlike before, are investing large sums of money and time, investigating and collecting data solely on women's psychographics—attitudes, habits, preferences—to meet their needs and wants, it is obvious that women today are no longer cocooned in their traditions but have imbibed western culture to their convenience. This osmosis of traditional culture with western culture not only reflects the metamorphosis of women in society but also reveals the new Indian market—a revolutionised consumer marketplace.

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